DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 319 016 CS 010 070

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TITLE All the King's Horses and Men, Basic Skills, and Whole Language.
PUB DATE 1 Mar 90
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Curriculum Assistance Conference of the ECIA Chapter 1 Basic and Migrant Programs (Tampa, FL, March 1, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beginning Reading; Elementary Education; Functional Literacy; Public Schools; *Reading Instruction; Reading Material Selection; *Reading Skills; *Reading Teachers; *Whole Language Approach

ABSTRACT

Like Humpty Dumpty after the fall from the wall, language does not work effectively when it is not whole. For many students, the reading problems they begin to experience in the third or fourth grade are caused by the basic skills manner in which beginning reading is taught. Recognizing the limitations of basic skills instruction and the genre of reading instructional materials which focus on a skills acquisition model of the reading process, school systems across the nation are implementing a shift in both instruction and materials to what is known as a literature-based, whole language approach. New directions for reading and writing instruction will enable students to meet the challenge of higher literacy expectations. Six suggestions provide teachers with a place to start as they move into whole language instruction: (1) provide only meaningful experiences for the language learner; (2) provide situations in which children read to learn as they learn to read; (3) provide a language learning setting that acknowledges the uniqueness of each individual learner; (4) provide experiences which guide, support, monitor, encourage, and facilitate learning; (5) provide opportunities for expression (writing) and comprehension (reading) through the idea of authors as readers; and (6) based on an understanding of whole language learning, speak to those who do not understand. Literature-based, whole language reading instruction must begin with the understanding and acceptance of the purpose of reading. Reading instruction must be implemented in the context of the other language/communication processes--spelling, listening, and writing. (MG)

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ALL THE KING'S HORSES AND MEN, BASIC SKILLS, AND WHOLE LANGUAGE

A paper presented at the
Curriculum Assistance Conference
ECIA Chapter I Basic and Migrant Programs

Tampa, Florida
March 1, 1990

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Abstract

Because many educators are concerned with the move in reading instruction from an isolated, sequential skills emphasis to a literature-based, whole language instructional model, this paper reviews the results of reading instruction which for the past fifteen years has focused on skills acquisition, describes the change needed in order to focus on skills application, proposes instruction based on a whole language perspective, and suggests teacher intervention strategies.

CS010070

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ALL THE KING'S HORSES AND MEN, BASIC SKILLS, AND WHOLE LANGUAGE

Introduction

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall,
All the King's horses and all the King's men,
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

For the last ten to fifteen years, elementary school reading instruction followed this pattern: (a) the performance level of each child on a set of prespecified reading skills was measured, (b) each child was placed on the appropriate level in a skill development program, (c) each child's progress through the sequential steps of the program was monitored, (d) performance levels were measured during program implementation and following program completion, and (e) based on detailed record-keeping, the skill acquisition competence level of each child was certified.

This pattern was part of the back-to-basics, accountability-driven movement which started in mid-70s, took over almost all of public education through the 80s, and at last is being challenged, because while skills acquisition instruction has led to high levels of skills acquisition, there is little evidence that students have acquired the "right" skills and the ability to use their acquired skills in the real-school tasks requiring reading-to-learn and the real-world tasks requiring at least functional levels of literacy.

Like Humpty Dumpty after the fall from the wall, language, that wonderful symbolic system with which humans communicate, works effectively only when it is whole. Bits and pieces of

language, acquired by children through reading-as-skills-acquisition models of instruction, might look good on tracking cards and as criterion-referenced test results, but they're as useless as Humpty Dumpty after the fall.

It is the purpose of this paper to (a) review the results of reading instruction which for the past fifteen years has focused on skills acquisition, (b) describe the change needed in order to focus on skills application, (c) propose as a solution reading instruction based on a whole language perspective, and (d) suggest teacher intervention strategies.

Reading Instruction From Then Until Now

Reading instruction fell quite easily into the back-to-basics style of schooling. Scope and sequence charts for many years have provided taxonomical listings of specific, isolated, and often abstract skills. Teachers could check off one skill after another until all were taught and learned, and then, at least from a basic skills perspective, the child was a competent reader. Reading instructional materials and programs were developed based on such taxonomies, including detailed, highly sequential, step-by-step manuals of directions for teachers.

For most students, this "reading as skills acquisition" model appeared to have worked. For others, a quick six weeks of summer school resulted in their acquisition/demonstration of the required skills and they proceeded to the next grade level. National Assessment of Educational Progress test data show that ability in basic reading skills improved greatly. The goal of skill acquisition had been met (NAEP, 1985)

From the basic skills point of view, the teaching/learning of reading worked well in the primary grades. The skills have been taught and learned. But, according to Goodman (1986a), each abstract, isolated skill is soon forgotten as children go on to further fractured fragments. Language, a structured, systematic, and very useful system necessary for communication becomes meaningless. It doesn't make sense.

Then, when students were required to apply their reading abilities in the middle and upper grades and beyond, the real failure of the basic skills approach was revealed. The same NAEP data referenced above, indicate that development of higher level reading skills showed little or no improvement and that application of these skills in the understanding of content materials had not advanced.

Lots of Pieces, But...

Unfortunately, at the time, little thought was given to the real goal of reading. For those who felt the goal was flawless, fluent oral reproduction of the graphic input, basic skills worked well. Most children exited "learning-to-read" loaded with skills, as attested to by their tracking cards.

But when they entered the academic world's next phase, "reading-to-learn," something didn't seem to work right. Teachers assigned chapters in science or social studies texts to be read, expecting learning to take place. When the expected learning did not take place, teachers suspected that the students hadn't or were unable to read the material.

The students had, in fact, applied skills they had been taught. They recognized letters, associated sounds with the

letters, and even said the words. But that's not the real goal of reading. Students did quite well with the recoding of graphemes to phonemes, so their teachers, parents, and they themselves assumed that comprehension/decoding of the message encoded by the author/writer would follow. Skills competence didn't help.

According to Anderson, even though children learn the mechanics of reading very well, they can fail to become very expert of comprehending what they read, and probably won't ever find reading a pleasurable activity (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985). Goodman (1986b) says that by viewing reading competence as mastery of arbitrary skill sequences measured by performance on multiple-choice tests, current instructional programs and materials misrepresent actual reading development. Pupils who read widely with good comprehension may score poorly on skills tests, while pupils who perform well on isolated skills tests, but who can't or don't care to read, are labeled "good readers."

The Problem

For many students, the reading problems they begin to experience in the third or fourth grade, as they are confronted with content-area text materials, are caused by the basic skills manner in which beginning reading is taught. Even armed with all of the letters, sounds, and other word processing skills, with which children exit "learning-to read," they are unable to "read-to-learn." Continued emphasis on an outdated "bottom-up" theoretical model of the reading process certainly contributes to

this problem.

Changing Expectations Require Instructional Change

To be truly literate requires the reader to be able to use her/his skills and knowledge with the level of competence needed to meet the required task (Hittleman, 1988). So, while it is good news that the basic skills have produced a basic level of literacy in children, the bad news is that such minimal levels of literacy are no longer sufficient for students required to deal effectively with complicated literary and informational material such as might be encountered in upper elementary, middle, and high school texts.

In other words, the demonstration of surface level understanding of a range of materials appropriate for their age isn't enough for students required to reason effectively about what they are reading and writing (Applebee, Langer & Mullis, 1987). And once students leave school, they find that lower level occupations, once plentiful for the less-than-literate, have or are rapidly disappearing. Success in today's information age requires more than "see it, say it" and "sound it out" reading abilities.

Will it be possible to shift teaching and learning from the heavy emphasis on minimal level skill acquisition to helping students develop into proficient skill users, who are able to think and can communicate effectively what they are thinking?

Thankfully, those critically concerned with basic skills approaches, have, since the late 70s and through the 80s until the present time, continued to investigate the cognitive

processes of readers to explain how they understand, not what they do. From such research have come models of the reading process that show reading as a search for meaning, in which the readers bring their experiential background and their language systems--grapho-phonic, syntactic, and semantic--to their understanding of the message of the author communicated through text materials.

From the perspective of such information, come new directions for reading and writing instruction which will enable students to meet the challenge of higher literacy expectations.

A Whole Language Perspective

Recognizing the limitations of basic skills instruction and the genre of reading instructional materials which focused on a skills acquisition model of the reading process, school systems across the nation are presently implementing a shift in both instruction and materials to what is known as a "literature-based, whole language approach."

In part this shift is based on recent investigations into the reading process which indicate that readers create meaning from a transaction/interaction among some information, the context of the information, and the reader's existing knowledge and language schemata. From a transaction/interaction perspective, reading is an interchange among the reader, the text, the environment, and the reading process.

From a communications model perspective, reading can be viewed as the receptive language process engaged in by a reader as s/he attempts to decode the message/text encoded by the

author who used the productive language process of writing. Encoding required the author to format the thoughts/ideas to be communicated into the graphemic code of the message/text using her/his grapho-phonic, syntactic, and semantic language systems. The reader decodes by bringing her/his experiential/conceptual background of thoughts/ideas to the search for meaning in the message/text, using her/his language systems.

Whole Language

Reading instruction that can be called "whole language" must be built on such understanding of the nature and role of author, text, reader, and language outlined above. Basic skills approaches ignored the author and reader, focusing almost entirely on the text and the graphemic and phonemic codes of language.

Language is symbolic, with the codes--letters, sounds, and words--only representing meaning, thoughts, and ideas. The over-emphasis in basic skills reading instruction on the symbols/codes of language resulted in students exiting "learning-to-read" equipped with numerous meaningless skills. The whole language perspective focuses more on the reader's knowledge and language system schemata--semantic, syntactic, and grapho-phonic--as s/he seeks to bring meaning to the text. In short, whole language reading instruction begins in the mind of the reader, not with the letters on the page.

Language learning is hard when:

It's artificial, it's broken into bits and pieces, it's nonsense, it's dull and uninteresting, it's irrelevant to the learner, it belongs to somebody else, it's out of

> context, it has no social value, it has no discernible purpose, it's imposed by someone else, it's inaccessible, [and] the learner is powerless. (Goodman, 1986a, p. 8).

If this sounds like a description of typical reading instruction found in millions of primary grade classrooms during the last ten to fifteen years, it is. On the other hand, language learning is very easy when:

> It's real and natural, it's whole, it's sensible, it's interesting, it's relevant, it belongs to the learner, it's part of a real event, it has social utility, it has purpose for the learner, the learner chooses to use it, it's accessible to the learner, [and] the learner has power to use it. (Goodman, 1986a, p. 8)

Literature Base

Stories found in basal readers have changed over the years as society's image of itself has changed. Content has passed through religious, moral, materialistic, and more recently, multicultural phases. Even though basal reader publishers are using more good literature and even hiring acclaimed children's authors to write original stories for the early reading texts (Cassidy, 1987), the content of these materials needs to be scrutinized in terms of the images presented to children. Sexism, ageism, work mode bias, racism, and stereotypic ideal family situations have no place in children's reading materials.

Further, in their analysis of basal readers, researchers from the Center for the Study of Reading found that when basal stories use real children's literature, they aren't bad. The

problem is that many stories seem unbelievable next to the children's own lives, and certainly dull in comparison to television. Stories focus on what characters say and do; not on what they are thinking and feeling, thereby depriving children of the opportunity to develop critical thinking strategies (Marshall, 1983).

If readers are to understand text; text must be understandable. Much of the content, characters, and situations presented in text materials must be within the realm of reality with which the approaches the text in her/his search for meaning.

Suggestions for Teachers

Perhaps the best suggestion one can give teachers faced with what appears to be a one-hundred-eighty degree shift in reading instruction from a reading-as-skills-acquisition approach to a reading-as-a-language-learning-meaning-seeking process is "don't panic". While years of lifeless skill-drilling have taken their toll on teachers and children alike because there was no pay-off, language didn't make sense, and meaning did not result from hours, days, weeks, and years spent in skill acquisition; the move to a whole language instructional process doesn't mean total abandonment of everything teachers have been doing.

Many good teachers for years have recognized the limitations of required skill-emphasis programs and provided their students with opportunities to develop into competent language users. Many children were such good language learners that they overcame the limitations of skills-driven programs and found out that reading can be meaningful.

The following suggestions provide teachers a place to start as they move into whole language instruction.

Suggestion One

Provide only meaningful experiences/activities for the language-learner. Such activities involve experiences with language that are whole, real, and relevant; that make sense and are functional; that are encountered in the context of their use.

An activity centering on learning that the letter c has two sounds, /s/ and /k/, doesn't meet these criteria. Second graders writing about their trip to the circus and learning of the two sounds of c, does.

Suggestion Two

Provide situations in which children read to learn as they learn to read. Meaningful, predictable stories and expository materials of interest work well in such situations. "Dick and Jane" type stories with highly controlled vocabulary and focusing on a limited number of linguistic features at a time, don't. For language to be meaningful, it must have meaning for the child.

Suggestion Three

Provide a language learning setting that acknowledges the uniqueness of each individual learner. A classroom containing a book area, a listening area, a discovery area, a writing area, and a role play area can provide this setting. A classroom in which all children are reading story after story from the basal reader followed by completing related skill activity sheets in a lock-step manner, doesn't.

Suggestion Four

Provide experiences in which they guide, support, monitor,

encourage, and facilitate learning. Teachers who understand the different paths each learner must take, do this. Teachers who attempt to control learning and impose uniform, arbitrary standards of performance, don't.

Suggestion Five

Provide opportunities for expression (writing) and comprehension (reading) through the idea of authors as readers. Classrooms which focus on functional, meaningful, and relevant language use, provide such opportunities. Classrooms which focus on reading apart from speaking, listening, and writing in a skill-by-skill approach, don't.

Suggestion Six

Based on an understanding of whole language learning, speak to those who don't understand, whether they're parents, school system decision-makers, or other teachers. Don't assume that everyone knows. An experienced teacher when asked about whole language replied that whole language means focusing on sight words rather than phonics. A school board member reported that children in whole language programs don't score well on reading skills tests so whole language can't be any good. Informed teachers can help clear up such misconceptions.

If these suggestions don't sound like what's been going on in reading instruction for the last decade, they're not! Attention to and application of suggestions like these and others will help children become effective language learners.

Conclusion

What is a literature-based, whole language approach to

reading instruction all about? Some respond that "all we need to do is do more of what we've been doing." Others fear the change, feeling that what they've been doing is wrong and must be abandoned. Neither of these responses is correct.

Literature-based, whole language reading instruction must begin with the understanding and acceptance of the purpose of reading--understanding the message of the author. Reading instruction must be implemented in the context of the other language/communication processes--speaking, listening, and writing. The content of the materials must be real to the children.

Finally, reading instruction hasn't been all wrong. It's just been starting in the wrong place. With comprehension as the goal, reading instruction must begin in the mind of the reader, not with the print on the page.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull, that being who challenged the minimum, which was the norm for seagulls, just before he turned over continued flock instruction to his follower, Fletcher Seagull, who, by the way, was quite nervous about something that wasn't in the seagull teacher's manual, said, "Poor Fletch. Don't believe what your eyes are telling you. All they show is limitation. Look with your understanding, find out what you already know, and you'll see the way to fly" (Bach, 1970, p. 92).

Who knows? This might work for reading teachers, too.

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